

"Romero" paints portrait of rebellious priest

By Joe Bustillos
Daily Titan

The film "Romero" is the powerful true story about a bookworm of a man, called upon by his superiors to maintain the status quo, who becomes a defiant voice of reform.

In 1977 when Oscar Romero (Raul Julia) was chosen to be Archbishop of San Salvador, his peers whispered among themselves that he was a good compromise choice for the position. With his ill health he wouldn't last long and wouldn't cause any trouble.

So, while many priests were encouraging the poor to speak out against the government, the political and upper ecclesiastical leaders were going about the first order of the business of leadership: guaranteeing their own positions of power. Selecting Romero as archbishop was part of this design. What they did not take into account, however, was that Romero would not look the other way when the government began to use bullets to maintain their power.

Julia portrays the painful evolution of Romero from fence-sitter to firebrand with finesse and conviction. For Julia there is the added burden of being true to the image of a man loved throughout Latin America.

In a recent interview, Julia said: "You have the responsibility of doing it well because there's a lot of people who really love the man and really respect him. And I hope they say, 'Okay, well, you know, he didn't insult us, he didn't insult Romero, he was faithful to his memory and to the man.'"

Remaining faithful to the memory of the man was no doubt assisted by the determined efforts of the film's producer, Father Ellwood Kieser, a Catholic priest. The film was rejected by the three television networks and the major studios. It took more than six years to get it produced.

Explaining his dedication to the project, Kieser said: "I find that it's important to me to know that there are those kinds of human beings in the world. People who busted out of their narcissism, who have transcended their egos and who care about the truth and care about people so much that they are ready to die for them."

Kieser cautioned against dismissing "Romero" as simply a Catholic movie. He said that people of all faiths and non-faiths worked on the picture.

"This is a movie made by people who are concerned about human rights, about human dignity, about freedom, about peace," Kieser said.

As Father Rutilio Grande, one of Romero's best friends, Richard Jordan dominates the first portion of the movie as the dedicated revolutionary who sees the Kingdom of God coming in the political reawakening of the people. Grande also plays a substantial role in stirring up Romero's political conscience when he is brutally murdered by a right-wing death squad.

The film makes no bones about sympathizing with the poor or with showing the inhuman cruelty of the powerful. But it does not ex-

cuse the violent tactics employed by the rebels or openly endorse whatever Marxist connections they might have.

When rebels took refuge in his church with a government hostage Romero confronted them and said: "Someone has to have the courage to say, 'Enough,' to say, 'Enough' to the violence!" He said that the rebels were no longer defending themselves but were attacking. And if they continued, he said, then they'd lose God just like the others and then there would be no end to the bloodshed.

"Romero" is in the same league as such films as "The Killing Fields," and "The Mission."

Back Pages, Sept. 14, 1989 — 7

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58

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[NOTE: Jay, I'm sorry this isn't double-spaced. I searched for more minutes than I care to admit to for the "menu" option for this feature. But Steve Jobs obviously felt it unnecessary that we should be able to double-space our MacIntosh corrupted documents. What incredible foresight! Ugh. JBB]